

# Trust and Uncertainty in International Relations

The fallacy of offensive realism

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# Abstract

The topic of international trust is contentious within International Relations. If states cannot trust each other doubts are cast on the possibility of them cooperating at all. According to offensive realism states can not trust each other because states can never be sure about other states' intentions. In this paper I will test this theory by seeking an answer to the question *does uncertainty rule out trust in international relations?*

I will do so by clarifying what uncertainty actually means in the context of International Relations, and argue that the offensive realist claim that states can never be sure about other states' intentions is based on a trivial, technical and ultimately erroneous use of the term 'certainty'. With the aid of epistemology and the philosophy of science I will show that the theory presented by offensive realism on the topic of trust is incoherent and therefore conclude that uncertainty does not, in fact, rule out trust in international relations. However, whether or not such trust can actually be achieved remains to be seen.

*Key words:* International Relations, Offensive Realism, Trust, Cooperation, Certainty, John J. Mearsheimer, Philosophy of Science, Epistemology  
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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Description and problem area

Can states trust each other? This is one of the central questions of International Relations, and one which forms the basis of many debates within the field, such as the effectiveness of international institutions, the prisoners' dilemma and the inevitability of arms races. Note the use of capital letters to distinguish the academic subject of International Relations, IR, from its main focus of inquiry, the phenomenon of international relations, ir.

One of the major theories weighing in on the question of trust is offensive realism. According to offensive realism, states are inevitably revisionist, i.e. seek to change the status quo in their quest for more power, in contrast to defensive realism which argues that states seek to preserve the status quo in order to ensure their own survival (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21). This behavior is not a result of states' inherently expansionist nature (Ibid.), but rather stems from the structure of the international system - a system which is based on the following five core assumptions:

1. The international system is anarchic
  2. Great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability
  3. States can never be certain about other states' intentions
  4. Survival is the primary goal of great powers
  5. Great powers are rational actors
- (Ibid., p. 31)

None of these assumptions are enough to support the theory of offensive realism on their own, but when combined form the core of its structural explanation for the behavior of states (Ibid., p. 29). This structure creates a constant state of fear between states that cannot be trivialized and guides states' behavior, in the face of which states can never be certain about other states' intentions (Ibid., p. 32). This - Mearsheimer's third assumption - is the main offensive realist argument against the use of studying international trust: if states cannot be sure about other states' intentions, how can they trust them? Thus, this will be the main focus of this paper: the assumption that states can never be certain about other states' intentions. I will question if the assumption is true and, if so, if it rules out the possibility of international trust.

For the purposes of this paper John J. Mearsheimer will serve as the face of offensive realism, as he is the main proponent - and arguably even the founder - of the theory. In the end, I will show that Mearsheimer presents an unsound

argument against the possibility of international trust, and that his use of the term 'certainty' goes against the very basis of International Relations inquiry.

## 1.2 Aim

The aims of this paper are twofold. First, I wish to evaluate the claim that uncertainty rules out the possibility of trust in international relations (because such trust can never be reached due to uncertainty). There is much written about trust between states, and it constitutes one of the most notable disagreements between realists and liberals, because trust forms the basis for the possibility of international cooperation (or the lack thereof). With this paper I hope to shed some light on the theoretical possibilities and limitations that underline the study of trust, as well as the very point of studying it at all.

Secondly, my purpose is to question the use of the term 'certainty' in political science in general and in International Relations in particular. By presenting the currently prevailing views on certainty in the fields of epistemology; philosophy of science; and methodology of International Relations I wish to show the problems that arise from using and drawing conclusions from the term. In particular, when Mearsheimer draws conclusions from the statement that "states can never be *certain* about other states' intentions" he erroneously demands a more stringent level of knowledge than can ever be supplied by International Relations.

## 1.3 Problem

In order to fulfill the two aims of this paper I wish to answer the following question:

*Does uncertainty rule out trust in international relations?*

Clearly, this question could be approached from several angles. I will carry out a theory testing study of Mearsheimer's arguments by analyzing the meaning of the term 'certainty' and its use in the study of International Relations. More specifically, I wish to ask whether or not Mearsheimer is right in his claim that states can never be certain of other states' intentions, and if so, what this means for the possibility of international trust. I will follow up my results by asking what they mean for the field of International Relations as a whole.

## 1.4 Method

Because this is neither an empirical nor a normative study it falls outside of the conventional methods available for traditional political science scholarship. This, however, does not diminish the importance of living up to certain scientific ideals. Because this paper concerns political theory and methodology I have no empirical claims to test or hypothetico-deductive model to fall back on (despite this being a *theory testing study*). This makes the scientific ideal of intersubjectivity all the more important (Jackson, 2011, p. 128 ff.). I will hopefully succeed in making my results easily understandable and replicable by using the following method:

I have begun by clearly defining the area of study and the question I wish to answer. I will then formalize Mearsheimer's argument and tackle his two premises one by one. Finally, I will rely on experts in the fields I discuss and truthfully reiterate their views to gain support for my arguments, resulting in a clear and cumulative conclusion. By doing this with extra vigilance for opacity and loose ends I hope to live up to the five scientific ideals proposed by Teorell & Svensson (2007): a clear *conclusion*; sufficient *evidence*; a healthy amount of *doubt*; explicit *intersubjectivity*; and a contribution to scientific *cumulation* (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 277-282). In closing, my most important method is, quite simply, clarity because while I cannot avoid the possibility of some people disagreeing with me, I can make sure that they clearly know why.

## 1.5 Theory and ontology

Any paper on political theory will, naturally, be quite theory heavy. In essence, this paper is *theory testing*, i.e. it tests Mearsheimer's theory that certainty rules out trust in international relations. It is worth noting that I only aim to test this specific theory, not all of offensive realism. Even if Mearsheimer is wrong in this instance it is not necessarily detrimental for offensive realism as a whole.

This paper differs from the traditional testing of theories because it does not test the theory against empirical evidence. I will instead test Mearsheimer's claims against the meaning of terms and the implications this has for epistemology and methodology. In the process of testing Mearsheimer's theory I will use a number of theories myself, perhaps most importantly Peter Unger's theory of epistemological skepticism.

Due to the use of a large number of theories within epistemology, philosophy, methodology and International Relations itself, I will include explanations and theoretical considerations as they occur throughout the text rather than bulk them together in the beginning. However, a few general points on theory and its usage are perhaps best made right away, because "ontological commitments, whether philosophical or scientific, logically precede substantive claims, and serve as the

often-unacknowledged basis on which empirical claims are founded” (Jackson, 2011, p. 40).

Although I do not make many, if any, empirical claims in this paper, it is still worth clarifying the ontological and epistemological assumptions upon which this paper is based. Generally speaking, the ontological basis for any inquiry in political science can be found in the answers to the following two questions: the ontological question *is there an independent reality?*, and the epistemological question *what can we know about that reality?* (Esaiason, 2007, p. 17). These are what Patrick Thaddeus Jackson (2011) describes as *core wagers* (or commitments) in philosophical ontology, which essentially means that the way scholars answers these two questions will affect the way they conduct the study of International Relations (Ibid., p. 196). The different methodologies that arise are illustrated by the following matrix (Ibid., p. 197):

<b>Methodologies</b>	phenomenalism	transfactualism
mind-world dualism	<i>neopositivism</i>	<i>critical realism</i>
mind-world monism	<i>analyticism</i>	<i>reflexivity</i>

Without going in to an superfluous amount of detail, the neopositivists believe that there is an independent reality (mind-world dualism) and that we can obtain objective knowledge about that reality (phenomenalism). Mearsheimer is a neopositivist, because he believes in an objective world and the possibility of objective knowledge about that world. In order to evaluate Mearsheimer’s arguments on their own merit I will therefore assume the same core neopositivist wager. However, the scarcity of empirical claims in this paper means that my conclusions can be shared by all methodologies and thus hopefully be of some use to the study of International Relations as a whole. In other words, I hope that my discussion and conclusions will be accessible to all of International Relations regardless of favored methodology or IR-theory.

## 1.6 Materials

Due to the non-empirical nature of this paper I can not refer to hard data or empirical observations. My material is therefore completely in the form of theoretical texts on the topics I cover, such as epistemology and philosophy of science. In choosing materials I have attempted to cover as many as possible of the different views on the questions I touch upon. I have, for example, attempted to report on the closest thing available to a consensus on the topic of certainty in International Relations methodology. My main mantra, however, has been to find the most prominent scholars in each field in order to take the important step from

personal views to intersubjective research (Jackson, 2011, p. 128 ff.). By referencing authorities like Unger and using the most all encompassing textbooks on the study of International Relations I hope to have succeeded in my goals.

The main topic of this paper are the arguments of offensive realism. To avoid misrepresenting the varying adherents of the theory I have focused exclusively on its leading scholar, John J. Mearsheimer and his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. I hope to have depicted his views correctly and honestly as well as achieved some degree of generalization from his personal views to that of the theory of offensive realism as a whole.

In closing, it is impossible to cover all materials (and the views contained therein) on any topic. I hope, however, that I have come close to that ideal by referencing breadth as well as depth.

## 1.7 Definitions

Although many terms will be explained as they occur throughout the text, a couple of them are perhaps best defined right away, namely *trust* and *certain*.

Trust is defined by the dictionary as:

*Noun*: reliance on the integrity, strength, ability, surety, etc., of a person or thing; confidence.

*Verb*: to rely upon or place confidence in someone or something (usually followed by in or to ): to trust in another's honesty; trusting to luck.

(Dictionary.com, "trust")

Within International Relations, however, trust has many different meanings, which I will explain in more detail in a later section entitled *Trust and mistrust in International Relations*. In this paper, I will use Andrew H. Kydd's definition of trust as "a belief that the other side prefers mutual cooperation to exploiting one's own cooperation, while mistrust is a belief that the other side prefers exploiting one's cooperation to returning it" (Kydd, 2005, p. 6). I believe, however, that my arguments and conclusions in this paper fair just as well with other definitions in the field.

Certain is defined by the dictionary as:

*Adjective*: 1. free from doubt or reservation; confident; sure: I am certain he will come.

2. established as true or sure; unquestionable; indisputable: It is certain that he tried.

(Dictionary.com, "certain")

These definitions are in essence what I subscribe to in this paper. As will become evident, however, I will focus a great deal of my efforts on further defining the *use* of the term 'certainty' and the implications this has for the study

of International Relations. Thus, the term will soon appear much more problematic than these definitions reveal.

## 2 Mearsheimer's argument formalized

Mearsheimer's argument is as follows:

Premise 1. States can trust each other only if they can be certain about other states' intentions

Premise 2. States can not be certain about other states' intentions

Conclusion. States can not trust each other

This can be formally translated into:

P1.  $P \rightarrow Q$

P2.  $\neg Q$

C.  $\neg P$

*Key:*

*P: "States can trust each other"*

*Q: "States can be certain about other states' intentions"*

*→: "Only if"*

*¬: "Not"*

An argument is sound if it has logical strength (i.e. formal validity) and true premises (Hughes, 2004, p. 186). Clearly, this argument is logically valid, since the conclusion follows necessarily from the premises. This is made extra clear by formalizing the argument, which has the form of a simple *modus tollens* (denying the consequent). In order to evaluate the soundness of Mearsheimer's argument I must therefore turn to the truth of his premises.

I will begin by evaluating the second premise - "states can not be certain of other states' intentions" - and then turn to the first - "states can trust each other only if they can be certain about other states' intentions" - which is the same as the main topic of this paper: *Does uncertainty rule out trust in international relations?*

I will argue that Mearsheimer's argument does not stand up to scrutiny, because the second premise is true, but only trivially true, and the first premise is not true at all. Uncertainty does therefore not rule out trust in international relations. I will do this by first describing the debate and the theory of offensive realism in more detail, followed by an in depth analysis of what Mearsheimer's use of the term 'certainty' actually means. I will then draw the conclusions of this analysis and present some thoughts on how Mearsheimer's fallacy can be avoided.

## 3 Trust and mistrust in International Relations

The idea of trust in international politics is as important as it is contentious because it forms the basis for the question of whether or not states can cooperate. Without some semblance of trust, states will be unwilling to make agreements or participate in international institutions. This lack of trust is an important part of the realists' skepticism regarding international cooperation, whereas the classical liberals contend that the essentially benign nature of states facilitates trust under the right conditions (Dunne, 2010, p. 59 ff. & p. 96 ff.).

It is worth noting that the concept of *trust* in International Relations does not necessarily carry some idealist meaning of good states and bad states or wild leaps of faith due to some romantic notion of the value of trust. Rather, asking if it is possible for states to trust each other is asking if it is possible to create conditions that can make states feel justifiably safe of their own survival through, for example, the use of international institutions like the U.N. For example, the neoliberals (i.e. neoliberal institutionalists) argue that while states are self-interested it is still possible to create conditions under which they can trust each other (Ibid., p. 117 ff.), whereas the structural realists (like Mearsheimer) argue that the structure of the international system makes this impossible (Ibid., p. 78 ff.). Thus, it is difficult to envision cooperation without some measure of trust.

Scholars of International Relations may differ on what security measures or safety controls would be needed for states to trust each other. For some, it may only take a written agreement and for others it may take complete disarmament from both sides. As previously mentioned, there are many definitions of trust in the context of International Relations. I will use Andrew H. Kydd's definition of trust as "a belief that the other side prefers mutual cooperation to exploiting one's own cooperation, while mistrust is a belief that the other side prefers exploiting one's cooperation to returning it" (Kydd, 2005, p. 6). I believe, however, that my use of the term covers most definitions (for example: Hoffman, 2002, p. 375-401), as I largely avoid discussing how it can be attained and instead focus on if trust is even worth pursuing in the face of uncertainty. I therefore hope that the arguments and conclusions of this paper are applicable to most other definitions of trust as well.

## 4 Offensive realism

Offensive realism is a subtheory of structural realism (i.e. neorealism) which, in turn, is related to the classical theory of realism. Like realism, structural realism, identifies states as the central actors in international relations, and the concept of power as the main currency between them (Dunne, 2010, p. 78). Furthermore, structural realism is skeptical about the possibility of cooperation between states and the ability of international agreements and institutions to ameliorate the situation. Conflict is therefore the natural state of affairs for classical and structural realists alike.

They differ, however, on the cause of this conflict between states. Whereas classical realists attribute it to human nature (and thus the nature of states) the structural realists find their explanation - as the name implies - in the structure of the international system (Ibid.). According to offensive realists, states are not driven to conflict by some inherent yearning for power, but are forced to seek power (or at least a balance of power) by the structure in which they find themselves. This structure is based on five core assumptions, namely that:

1. The international system is anarchic
2. Great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability
3. States can never be certain about other states' intentions
4. Survival is the primary goal of great powers
5. Great powers are rational actors

(Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 31)

None of these assumptions are sufficient on their own to explain states' behavior, but "depict a world of ceaseless security competition" when combined (Dunne, 2010, p. 79). Within structural realism there is a further divide, between defensive and offensive realism.

Defensive realists, like Kenneth Waltz, argue that while the international system leaves states little choice but to compete with each other for power, their main goal is to ensure their own survival by maintaining the status quo and their positions in the system (Ibid., p. 82). In contrast, the offensive realists, like John J. Mearsheimer, argue that a state's ultimate goal is, and should be, hegemony (meaning 'domination', from the greek *hegemon*, a leader) in the system (Hollis & Smith, 1990, p. 36; Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 21). This leads to a constant struggle for power, as all states strive to increase their share in the zero sum game of international politics. Due to their similar stances on uncertainty and mistrust between states, the defensive and offensive realists are in a way both questioned on the topic of *certainty* in this paper. While Waltz is open to a similar criticism as Mearsheimer, I choose to focus solely on the latter, as Mearsheimer takes a more

uncompromising stance on the factual accuracy of his theory, whereas Waltz can be seen as painting more of a generalizing, ideal picture of states' behavior.

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer mainly focuses on "great powers" because "these states have the largest impact on what happens in international politics" (Ibid., p. 5), but adds that "all states are influenced by this logic", which is why I in this paper will refer to *states* rather than *great powers*.

Offensive realism is, in summation, a theory that offers a structural explanation for the behavior of states. States seek maximum power at the expense of other states, because this is the only way to achieve their ultimate aim: survival. As all states strive for hegemony, conflicts occur, deals are broken and trust is most definitely ruled out.

## 5 Mearsheimer and the question of certainty

Throughout his seminal work, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001), John J. Mearsheimer makes the claim that states can never be certain (or *sure*) of other states' intentions. This is in part due to the structure of the international system in which all of the five assumptions lend support to each other. For example, a state has more reason to fear other states when there is no higher authority to offer protection (i.e. in a state of anarchy) and when other states possess some inherent military capability (Ibid., p. 32). Furthermore, Mearsheimer offers a number of compelling historical examples of states seeking to expand their power and behaving treacherously toward one another in the process, such as Nazi Germany's breach of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1941 (Ibid., p. 196).

This seemingly common sense structure coupled with empirical examples paints a distrustful picture of international relations. But Mearsheimer and the offensive realists do not make the claim that states cannot trust each other; they make the claim that states can never be *certain* about other states intentions. This, according to offensive realists, renders the question of trust moot. In other words, Mearsheimer makes the case that what is needed for states to cooperate is certainty, not trust, and that the absence of certainty rules out the possibility of trust (Kydd, 2005, p. 14). At first glance the difference between these two claims may seem like a semantic triviality. However, in the following pages I will argue that this is not the case and clearly show the problems that arise from Mearsheimer's insistence on certainty rather than trust. First, however, it may be prudent to describe Mearsheimer's take on the topic of certainty about states' intentions in more detail.

"The third assumption is that states can never be certain of about other states' intentions. Specifically, no state can be sure that another state will not use its offensive military capability to attack the first state. This is not to say that states necessarily have hostile intentions. Indeed, all of the states in the system may be reliably benign, but it is impossible to be sure of that judgement because intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty. There are many possible causes for aggression, and no state can be sure that another state is not motivated by one of them. Furthermore, intentions can change quickly, so a state's intentions can be benign one day and hostile the next. Uncertainty about intentions is unavoidable, which means that states can never be sure that states do not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities."

(Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 31)

An important distinction between trust and certainty can be noticed in the preceding quote: according to Mearsheimer states can be *reliably benign* - i.e. we can reliably trust their good intentions - but this does not matter because "it is impossible to be sure of that judgement because intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty". This uncertainty need not even apply to the current situation; it is enough for another state to exist, however benign, because its inherent military capability means that we cannot be certain of its future intentions (Ibid., p. 43). "A state's leaders might be genuinely satisfied with the status quo and fully capable of conveying their benign intentions to the other states in the system. But what if those leaders after ten years change their minds and develop revisionist goals?" (Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 231-243). This means that states cannot be certain that other states will not break their agreements (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 38), nor can they "work to promote peace because they cannot be sure that their efforts will succeed" (Ibid., p. 51).

What Mearsheimer's continuous demands for certainty mean is that international trust is not possible; what matters is not a benign relationship of mutual trust (like, for example, that between the Scandinavian countries) because the possibility of future changes of heart, or the very idea of a broken promise, is enough for states to rule out trusting each other.

## 6 Certainty

### 6.1 Overview

In order to evaluate Mearsheimer's second premise - that states can not be certain about other states' intentions - one could attempt to tackle it empirically by studying the interactions between states in order to find out whether or not this is the case. Because, as I will show, Mearsheimer's use of the term 'certainty' makes such a study impossible I choose another line of reasoning by asking what it means to be certain of something and if this is even possible in the context of International Relations. I do this by first describing what the experts on knowledge, the epistemologists, have to say on the matter and attempt to place Mearsheimer's use of the term 'certainty' in the debate, mainly by comparing it to Peter Unger's skeptic theory of absolute terms. I then link epistemology to International Relations by giving an account of 'certainty' in philosophy of science and political science methodology.

It is difficult to give an uncontentious definition of certainty or to find any rules for its "proper" use because there is no consensus among philosophers or political scientists on the issue. Instead, the best I can hope for is to give as honest and inclusive a description as possible of the field, and attempt to draw the best conclusions from those who are wiser and more knowledgable than I. I also sincerely hope not to misrepresent the views of the offensive realists in general and Mearsheimer in particular. Arguing against a straw man may be the easiest way to go, but is definitely not the most productive. By capturing the predominant views in the field I hope to "stand on the shoulders of the elders" and gain support for my arguments in the process (Teorell & Svensson, 2007, p. 19).

To begin the point I will make over the following pages, let me offer an analogy that illustrates Mearsheimer's mistake. Imagine a newly designed airplane about to take its maiden voyage full of passengers. The engineers are naturally worried about this test flight and fear the for the lives of the passengers should anything go wrong. Much like in international politics the stakes are high. According to Mearsheimer's theory the engineers should ask themselves "can we be certain that the plane will not crash?", and then conclude that they can not, in fact, be certain. This means that they therefore do not have enough trust in the safety of the plane to let it take off. Mearsheimer is of course correct, but only in a trivial and unproductive way because no valid conclusions can be drawn from such a concept of certainty. In the following pages I will show where Mearsheimer went wrong and why.

I suggest that the prudent question for the engineer's to ask themselves is instead "what can we do in terms of further engineering, testing and design to feel

a sufficient amount of trust in the safety of the aircraft to let it make its maiden voyage?”. Whether or not the plane will crash is indeed a matter of uncertainty, but that does not rule out the possibility of gaining sufficient trust in its capabilities through further studies.

## 6.2 Certainty in epistemology

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and belief (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "epistemology"). As such, the study of epistemology asks questions such as: "What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge? What are its sources? What is its structure, and what are its limits? As the study of justified belief, epistemology aims to answer questions such as: How we are to understand the concept of justification? What makes justified beliefs justified? Is justification internal or external to one's own mind?" (Ibid.)

There is no definitive consensus on the issue of certainty (as there hardly ever is in philosophy), but there is an uncommon amount of unity regarding the meaning of the term with regards to epistemology. In short, certainty is "either the highest form of knowledge or is the only epistemic property superior to knowledge" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "certainty").

Going back to the ancient Greek philosophers there is a great deal of skepticism within epistemology regarding when, if at all, we can be said to know something (Ibid.). To demand certainty of any factual claim is the epistemically most demanding request of all, because *certainty* is either the highest form of knowledge or the only thing superior to knowledge. In other words, when I say that you cannot be certain of something I am saying that you cannot fulfill the highest possible form of knowledge regarding the issue at hand.

In our everyday life we may often use 'knowledge' and 'certainty' interchangeably. Epistemology, however, makes the distinction of 'certainty', unlike 'knowledge', requiring no possibility of us being wrong. This "knowing in the strong sense" means that "nothing that might yet be discovered would make any difference" to make us doubt our conviction even slightly (Hospers, 1997, p. 49).

What does this mean for Mearsheimer's claim that states can never be certain of other states' intentions? Can states really be said to be certain in this strong sense? It appears that they can not because knowing any intentions - let alone such diffuse ones as those of other states - cannot fulfill the strict demands of 'certainty'. This indicates that Mearsheimer's claim is correct. But at what cost? To answer this question I will turn to one of the most influential skeptics in contemporary philosophy, Peter Unger.

## 6.3 Peter Unger's *A Defense of Skepticism*

Peter Unger's theory of relative and absolute terms further illustrates how epistemology supports Mearsheimer's assertion that states cannot be certain of other states' intentions. However, it also shows that he is right only in a technical, trivial and, ultimately, problematic way.

Peter Unger's essay *A Defense of Skepticism*<sup>1</sup> contains two separate parts in defense of epistemological skepticism (the idea that we cannot know much, if anything at all). For the purposes of this paper I will only focus on describing the discussion regarding relative and absolute terms.

Unger argues that the 'terms of knowledge' (i.e. the terms in our language that we use when discussing or describing knowledge) belong to a class of terms he dubs *absolute terms* (Unger, 2007, p. 327). If Unger is correct in his description of absolute terms, and about the following claim that 'certainty' is such a term, we cannot be said to be certain of anything. I believe that Unger is successful and, more importantly, that Mearsheimer appears to be using the term 'certainty' in such an absolute manner. If this is the case, Mearsheimer's assumption that states cannot be certain about other states' intentions is indeed true, but trivially so, which presents a problem for his argument.

Absolute terms are, according to Unger, not matters of degree; either terms contain their properties completely, or not at all. He proposes that 'flat' is an example of such a term (another example is 'straight'). If we say that something is flat, we mean that it is completely, absolutely, perfectly flat, i.e. we mean that it does not contain any bumps, curves or other properties which would render it anything but perfectly flat (Ibid.). Absolute terms are in contrast to, but also related to, *relative terms*, which are matters of degree. Unger's example of a relative term is 'bumpy'. When we say that a surface is bumpy, we mean that it contains some degree of bumpiness.

The difference between the terms is made clear with the addition of matters of degree, such as *kind of* or *very*. When we describe a surface as *very bumpy*, we appear to be saying how bumpy it is (for example that it contains more bumps than something that is *kind of bumpy*). But when we describe a surface as being very flat we appear to be describing how close the surface comes to being (absolutely) flat, i.e. that it is in fact not flat, but closer to the absolute term of flatness than something that is *kind of flat* (Ibid., p. 328). With the hope that the distinction between absolute and relative terms has been made clear, I will continue to focus solely on absolute terms, and their implications for epistemology.

In order to further clarify the properties of absolute terms, it may be helpful to consider a comparison between degrees of flatness. When we say that A is flatter than B, we can mean one of two things, namely that either A is *absolutely flat* and

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in the *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971), pp. 198-219

that B *is not*; or that neither is absolutely flat but that A *comes closer to* being absolutely flat than B (Ibid., p. 329).

One noteworthy aspect of absolute terms is that they represent some ideal state, the existence of which is theoretically possible but difficult to find in practice. We may, for example, study a metallic kitchen surface that appears to be flat (in the absolute sense), but upon further inspection under a microscope we will find that it contains minuscule bumps or irregularities. Perhaps we are then able to sand down the surface so that it once again appears absolutely flat but when we use an even better microscope we see that it is, in fact, still bumpy on a molecular level. And so the search for absolute flatness continues to the atomic level and further. It also follows from describing a surface as (absolutely) flat that, "as a matter of logical necessity", there never is any surface which is flatter than it is because if A is said to be flatter than B, then either A is (absolutely) flat and B is not, or A is closer to being flat than B (Ibid., p. 333).

It is now obvious that the requirements needed for fulfilling an absolute term are difficult to achieve indeed. Unger goes on to claim that certainty, like flatness, is an absolute term. Without going in to detail, I believe that this is at least intuitively convincing. If we accept that certainty is an absolute term, and then considered what absolute terms demand, can we really say that we are certain of anything?

If we say that "we are (absolutely) certain that A" we mean that "we have no doubt whatsoever that A", in the same way that a flat surface is absolutely void of irregularities. Furthermore, when we say that we are certain of something it logically follows that there is never anything else of which we are more certain (Ibid.). When faced with the absoluteness of certainty, Unger concludes that it is reasonable to suppose that "hardly anyone, if anyone at all, is certain that 45 and 56 are 101" (Ibid.). One need not, however, go as far as doubting mathematics in order to agree with Mearsheimer's assumption that states can never be certain about other states' intentions. Unger's description of absolute terms shows the basis for the previously mentioned description of certainty as meaning that "nothing that might yet be discovered would make any difference" to make us doubt our conviction even slightly (Hospers, 1997, p. 49). I will now move on by showing that Mearsheimer uses the term 'certainty' in the absolute sense. If he does, this means that his claim that states can never be certain of other states' intentions is indeed true, but only in a trivial sense because we can not be certain of anything, if anything at all. Thus, his use of the term 'certainty' begs the question, because he sets the bar so high that his claim can not be tested, nor empirically disproved.

### 6.3.1 Mearsheimer, certainty, and absolute terms

The epistemic status of the term 'certainty' is, of course, external to Mearsheimer's theory, meaning that his theory of states' behavior does not include or mandate a position on epistemology. Mearsheimer could then respond to my

critique by saying that he simply does not agree with Unger's theory, and is therefore not affected by it, just as a mathematician should not have to include a section arguing against Unger every time he makes the claim in a paper that 45 and 56 are 101. Indeed, Unger's theory could be applied arbitrarily to any kind of claim about certainty or knowledge. I believe, however, that it is valid to apply the theory of absolute terms in Mearsheimer's case because he seems to use the term 'certainty' in precisely this way, and must therefore face its consequences.

Although his text does include examples of deception, lying and broken promises among states, Mearsheimer's claim that they can never be *certain* about each others intentions is primarily based on a "compelling logic" rather than empirical evidence (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 29). He describes the uncertainty about other states' intentions as "a constant fact of life" (Ibid., p. 43) and claims that "intentions are impossible to divine with 100 percent certainty" (Ibid., p. 31). Recall that according to Mearsheimer's use of the term 'certainty' "all of the states in the system may be reliably benign", but this does not matter because their theoretical capabilities, however small, are enough to cause uncertainty: "...even if there were no weapons, the individuals in those states could still use their feet and hands to attack the population of another state. After all, for every neck, there are two hands to choke it." (Ibid., p. 30-31).

The answer to whether or not Mearsheimer uses the term 'certainty' in the absolute sense, can be found by asking the question *what would it take for states to be certain of other states' intentions?* Mearsheimer has made it clear that nothing can ever make them certain of this, which renders his use of the term absolute.

In other words, Mearsheimer appears to be using certainty regarding states' intentions in the trivial sense of "I can never be certain that the sun will rise in the morning" rather than the empirical sense of "studying the orbits of the planets and our previous knowledge of astronomy gives us sufficient reason to trust that the sun will rise in the morning".

What does this mean for Mearsheimer's argument? It means that premise 2 - states can never be certain about other states' intentions - is true because nothing can make an absolute term untrue. This, however, makes it utterly unscientific and causes great problems for premise 1 (which is the main question I seek to answer in this paper) - states can trust each other only if they can be certain about other states' intentions. The remaining question is therefore if uncertainty about other states' intentions really rules out the possibility of trust between states. To show why uncertainty does not rule out trust I will turn from epistemology to the philosophy of science.

## 6.4 Certainty in the philosophy of science

Philosophy of science is the study of the elements of scientific inquiry and method from a philosophical perspective (Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "philosophy of science").

The purpose of using philosophy of science to answer the question of whether or not uncertainty rules out trust in international relations is not to institute rules for the study of International Relations; deploying claims from philosophy of science to discipline all empirical research in the field of International Relations is fraught with peril (Jackson, 2011, p. 24). Rather, my goal is to relay the main points of agreement among philosophers on the topic of certainty in order to evaluate Mearsheimer's first premise. I hope to show that referring to certainty rather than trust, as he does, does not lead to any profound insight regarding the nature of states' behavior. On the contrary, it is a way of hiding behind technicalities of semantics and thus does not rule out international trust, because trust does not require certainty.

According to Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "...philosophy of science can help us to *clarify* IR research practices, with an eye towards making them more coherent and potentially more productive" (Ibid., p. 25). That is precisely what studying *trust*, as opposed to *certainty*, does.

There are several competing theories of what constitutes good science, from the logical positivists to Popper, Kuhn, and Lakatos (Ibid., p. 10-16). Thankfully, there is a semblance of consensus regarding what degree of knowledge is demanded to study the world. The previously mentioned strict proofs (whose conclusion necessarily follows from the premises) can only be found in maths (or, according to skeptics like Unger, perhaps not even there). Not even the "hard sciences", like physics or chemistry, talk of being *certain* in the absolute sense of having strict proof for their findings. "Whenever we rely upon anything less than a strict proof, there is a possibility that a truth claim may turn out to be false", which is the very basis of the hard science approach of trial and error (i.e. falsification according to Popper or a "research programme" according to Lakatos) (Ibid.).

International Relations, and indeed all social sciences, use an even less stringent concept of truth in its methods because the phenomena studied (such as the behavior of states) is such that it is all but impossible to come to any *certain* conclusions. "Very few, if any, theorists in IR believe that we can ever produce a set of statements that can be said to be accurate in representing the world exactly as it is" (Dunne, 2010, p. 30). Neoliberalism, for example, "might claim that while their account of the role of institutions is not the only one, nor necessarily an absolute truth, it is still the most valid one... because it can be considered more truth-approximating than many others" (Ibid.).

However, International Relations need not despair; the less demanding version of knowledge it produces does not make it any less worth than the hard sciences, nor does it reduce the value of its results. States and their behavior cannot be

tested in a lab or deduced like a mathematical equation. International Relations attempts to reach the best epistemological results possible given the complexity and elusiveness of its subject matter. In other words, the consensus in the philosophy of science and methodology is that while International Relations may not produce *certainty* in the absolute sense it may "aspire to knowledge that approximates that goal" and that this is perfectly acceptable (Ibid.).

What does this mean for the question of certainty and trust? We have already seen that Mearsheimer's use of the term 'certainty' in the strict, absolute sense means that his claim that states can never be certain of other states' intentions is true by definition. If it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to be certain of anything then this definitely applies to states' intentions as well. But does this fact mean that states cannot possibly trust each other? It does not, because Mearsheimer is only *technically* true in a scientifically trivial way. Rather than ask how states can feel secure enough to cooperate, he sets the bar impossibly high and concludes that this supports his theory. But, as we have seen, this goes against the very goal of International Relations scholarship, which is to gain a form of knowledge that is less than *certainty*, but a productive form of knowledge nonetheless (and perhaps the best that we can achieve).

For Mearsheimer to demand more from the analysis of states' behavior than is expected even of the hard sciences is problematic to say the least. In other words, Mearsheimer is hiding behind such an uncompromising term that his argument is true by definition. But this does not rule out trust because we can not draw any conclusions at all from Mearsheimer's claim, and even less so build a theory of International Relations on it. Thus, it is much more productive to ask if states can possibly *trust* each other because this is an empirically testable way to evaluate the relationship between states. To further illustrate this I turn to the most widely accepted definition of uncertainty in economics, courtesy of Frank Knight, which I suggest lends support to the merit of studying *trust* rather than *certainty*.

#### 6.4.1 Knightian uncertainty

In his most famous work *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit* (1921), the economist Frank Knight made an important distinction between risk and uncertainty that is still used today and possibly offers a solution to the problem of studying trust despite uncertainty. In short, the difference between risk and uncertainty according to Knight is that risk can be measured and calculated (such as the statistical risk of losing at a coin toss) whereas uncertainty is unmeasurable (such as the uncertainty of whether or not another state will attack us) (Jarvis, 2011, p. 299).

"Causality and the generative drivers of human action were simply too interdependent, too complex and far too emotive in terms of subjective calculation to make them amendable to general laws and principles" (Ibid., p. 309). Some events are uncertain because states simply cannot calculate them, but this does not mean, as Mearsheimer suggests, that uncertainty leaves them no option but to destroy the object of their uncertainty. Rather, uncertainty can possibly be

managed and measures can be taken to mitigate possible negative effects (Ibid., p. 308). Just because uncertainty cannot be avoided does not mean it cannot be ameliorated. In the case of states in the international system I suggest that this form of interaction in the face of (trivial) uncertainty is called *trust*. I do not purport to know if states can possibly reach a level of trust sufficient for cooperation (through, for example, international institutions) but, as we have seen, it is a much more productive possibility than the scientifically useless term ‘certainty’. This means that uncertainty ”sets us free” and liberates us from just the kind of historical determinism that Mearsheimer proposes (Ibid.).

In conclusion, let us revisit the airplane analogy of chapters past to see how Mearsheimer’s mistake can be mended by a Knightian concept of uncertainty. Imagine a newly designed airplane about to take its maiden voyage full of passengers. The engineers are naturally worried about this test flight and fear the for the lives of the passengers should anything go wrong. Much like in international politics the stakes are high. According to Mearsheimer’s theory the engineers should ask themselves ”can we be certain that the plane will not crash?”, and then conclude that they can not, in fact, be certain. This means that they therefore do not have enough trust in the safety of the plane to let it take off. Mearsheimer is of course correct, but only in a trivial and unproductive way because no valid conclusions can be drawn from such a concept of certainty.

According to Knight, the prudent question for the engineer’s to ask themselves is instead ”what can we do in terms of further engineering, testing and design to feel a sufficient amount of trust in the safety of the aircraft to let it make its maiden voyage?”. Whether or not the plane will crash is a matter of uncertainty, but that does not rule out the possibility of gaining sufficient trust in its capabilities through further studies. It is now hopefully evident how, according to Knight, uncertainty can by definition never be overcome but that does not prevent us from ameliorating it.

## 7 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to answer the question *Does uncertainty rule out trust in international relations?* I believe that I have shown that uncertainty does not rule out trust in international relations, and that I have also stated as clearly as possible why this is the case. Mearsheimer presented two premises to support his theory that states cannot trust each other: firstly, that states can trust each other only if they can be certain about other states' intentions, and secondly that states can not be certain about other states intentions.

I have shown that his claim that states can not be certain about other states' intentions is in fact true but only because he uses 'certainty' as an absolute term, which necessarily and trivially makes it so. This renders the truth of his claim inconsequential for the possibility of trust between states. Thus, the claim that states can trust each other only if they can be certain about other states' intentions falls as well. I have shown this from an epistemological as well as from a methodological point of view and, in doing so, I hope to have successfully tested Mearsheimer's theory and shown that it does not hold up to scrutiny.

The most important contribution of my conclusion to the study of International Relations is perhaps in defining what questions we should ask in regards to international cooperation. I suggest that we should not ask "can states be certain?" but rather "under what, if any, circumstances can states trust each other?". The debate between the liberals and the realists should take place in the empirical study of the latter question instead of hiding behind the technical, semantic walls of the former .

I do not purport to know if states can, in fact, trust each other. Nor do I know what such a trust would entail if it were possible. I do, however, believe that I have successfully tested Mearsheimer's theory and presented sufficient support for my conclusion that *uncertainty does not rule out trust in international relations*.

## 8 Suggestions for further studies

I sincerely hope that the conclusion of this paper - that *uncertainty does not rule out trust in international relations* - can be of use to the empirical study of international trust and international cooperation. I agree with Jackson's claim that "...philosophy of science can help us to *clarify* IR research practices, with an eye towards making them more coherent and potentially more productive" (Jackson, 2011, p. 25), which is exactly what I hope to have done in this particular case. Although this paper does not disprove offensive realism it casts serious doubts on at least one of Mearsheimer's core assumptions. Thus, his assumption that *states can never be certain of other states' intentions* needs to be rephrased into something akin to *states can not trust each other*. Since the new assumption, unlike the old, can be tested empirically it opens up the field to further studies on the merit of Mearsheimer's claim. On the topic of international trust and cooperation I suggest for further studies to leave their theoretical dogmas behind and not dismiss the possibility of trust offhand, and instead ask what exactly such a trust would entail.

According to Mearsheimer himself "you would deal my theory a mortal blow if you could show that states can communicate their intentions to each other" and thereby gain trust. (Mearsheimer, 2006, p. 105ff.). If such a mortal blow can be dealt remains for others to find out. There are already some impressive contenders, such as Andrew H. Kydd's game theoretic approach to overcome the security dilemma through communication between states (Kydd, 2005), and the neoliberal scholars who argue that international institutions can provide the answer (Dunne, 2010, p. 123 ff.)

Perhaps the conclusion that 'certainty' is not a useful term in this case can be applied to other areas as well and thereby inspire further studies. I would not be surprised to encounter other instances of the misuse of the term 'certainty' in other social sciences as well. The unfalsifiable use of absolute terms to support ones conclusions is an easy mistake to make, but I believe that it is a mistake nonetheless. Further studies would do well to find these instances and replace them with more productive terms for the sake of scientific progress.

Finally, although this focus on the meaning of terms is not common in International Relations I believe that it can contribute to the field by exposing the limits and possibilities that language creates. In this case, certainty stood in the way of empirical studies in a way that may occur more often than we think. I suggest that there is more to be done on this topic and, more importantly, using this method.

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